

## TYRTAEUS

- 2 . . . let us obey [the kings, who are]  
nearer the line [of the gods].  
For fair-crowned Hera's husband, Kronos' son  
himself,  
Zeus, gave the sons of Heracles this state.  
Under their lead we left windswept Erineos  
and came to Pelops' broad sea-circled land.\*
- 4 This was the oracle from Phoebus that they heard  
at Delphi, and brought back the god's decree:  
'First in debate shall heaven's favourites, the kings,  
the guardians of fair Sparta's polity,  
speak, and the elders. After them the commoners  
shall to direct proposals make response  
with conscientious speech and all just  
consequence,  
making no twisted plans against our realm;  
and commoners' majority shall win the day.'  
Phoebus brought forth this guidance for the state.
- 5 . . . our sovereign Theopompus, whom the gods  
did love,  
through whom we took Messene's broad  
dance-grounds,  
Messene good to plough and good to plant for  
fruit.  
To conquer her they fought full nineteen years  
steadfastly ever, with endurance in their hearts,  
those spearmen of our fathers' fathers' time,  
and in the twentieth the foe took flight, and left  
their fertile farms among Ithome's heights.
- 6 (*The enslaved Messenians were*)  
like donkeys suffering under heavy loads,  
by painful force compelled to bring their masters  
half  
of all the produce that the soil brought forth.



- 7 . . . making a wailing funeral chorus, they and  
their wives,  
when one of their masters met his destiny.
- 10 For it is fine to die in the front line,  
a brave man fighting for his fatherland,  
and the most painful fate's to leave one's town  
and fertile farmlands for a beggar's life,  
roaming with mother dear and aged father,  
with little children and with wedded wife.  
He'll not be welcome anywhere he goes,  
bowing to need and horrid poverty,  
his line disgraced, his handsome face belied;  
every humiliation dogs his steps.  
This is the truth: the vagrant is ignored  
and slighted, and his children after him.  
So let us fight with spirit for our land,  
die for our sons, and spare our lives no more.  
You young men, keep together, hold the line,  
do not start panic or disgraceful rout.  
Keep grand and valiant spirits in your hearts,  
be not in love with life—the fight's with men!  
Do not desert your elders, men with legs  
no longer nimble, by recourse to flight:  
it is disgraceful when an older man  
falls in the front line while the young hold back,  
with head already white, and grizzled beard,  
gasping his valiant breath out in the dust  
and clutching at his bloodied genitals,  
his nakedness exposed: a shameful sight  
and scandalous. But for the young man, still  
in glorious prime, it is all beautiful:  
alive, he draws men's eyes and women's hearts;  
felled in the front line, he is lovely yet.  
Let every man then, feet set firm apart,  
bite on his lip and stand against the foe.
- 11 But Heracles unvanquished sowed your stock:  
take heart! Zeus bows not yet beneath the yoke.  
Fear not the throng of men, turn not to flight,  
but straight toward the front line bear your  
shields,



despising life and welcoming the dark  
contingencies of death like shafts of sun.  
You know what wreck the woeful War-god makes,  
and are well to the grim fight's temper tuned.  
You have been with pursuers and pursued,  
you young men, and had bellyful of both.  
You know that those who bravely hold the line  
and press toward engagement at the front  
die in less numbers, with the ranks behind  
protected; those who run, lose all esteem.  
The list is endless of the ills that hurt  
the man who learns to think the coward's  
thoughts:  
for it's a bad place, as he flees the fray,  
to have his wound, between the shoulder-blades,  
and it's a shameful sight to see him lie  
dead in the dust, the spear-point in his back.  
Let every man, then, feet set firm apart,  
bite on his lip and stand against the foe,  
his thighs and shins, his shoulders and his chest  
all hidden by the broad bulge of his shield.  
Let his right hand brandish the savage lance,  
the plume nod fearsomely above his head.  
By fierce deeds let him teach himself to fight,  
and not stand out of fire—he has a shield—  
but get in close, engage, and stab with lance  
or sword, and strike his adversary down.  
Plant foot by foeman's foot, press shield on shield,  
thrust helm at helm, and tangle plume with  
plume,  
opposing breast to breast: that's how to fight,  
with the long lance or sword-grip in your hand.  
You light-armed men, wherever you can aim  
from the shield-cover, pelt them with great rocks  
and hurl at them your smooth-shaved javelins,  
helping the armoured troops with close support.

12

I would not rate a man worth mention or account  
either for speed of foot or wrestling skill,  
not even if he had a Cyclops' size and strength  
or could outrun the fierce north wind of Thrace;



I would not care if he surpassed Tithonus' looks,  
or Cinyras' or Midas' famous wealth,  
or were more royal than Pelops son of Tantalus,  
or had Adrastus' smooth persuasive tongue,  
or fame for everything save only valour: no,  
no man's of high regard in time of war  
unless he can endure the sight of blood and death,  
and stand close to the enemy, and fight.  
This is the highest worth, the finest human prize  
and fairest for a bold young man to win.  
It benefits the whole community and state,  
when with a firm stance in the foremost rank  
a man bides steadfast, with no thought of shameful  
flight,  
laying his life and stout heart on the line,  
and standing by the next man speaks  
encouragement.  
This is the man of worth in time of war.  
Soon he turns back the foemen's sharp-edged  
battle lines  
and strenuously stems the tide of arms;  
his own dear life he loses, in the front line felled,  
his breast, his bossed shield pierced by many a  
wound,  
and of his corselet all the front, but he has brought  
glory upon his father, army, town.  
His death is mourned alike by young and old; the  
whole  
community feels the keen loss its own.  
People point out his tomb, his children in the  
street,  
his children's children and posterity.  
His name and glorious reputation never die;  
he is immortal even in his grave,  
that man the furious War-god kills as he defends  
his soil and children with heroic stand.  
Or if in winning his proud spear-vaunt he escapes  
the doom of death and grief's long shadow-cast,  
then all men do him honour, young and old alike;  
much joy is his before he goes below.



He grows old in celebrity, and no one thinks  
 to cheat him of his due respect and rights,  
 but all men at the public seats make room for him,  
 the young, the old, and those of his own age.  
 This is the excellence whose heights one now must seek  
 to scale, by not relenting in the fight.

13 . . . a tawny lion's spirit in your breast.

14 . . . until it ends  
 in highest heroism, or in death.

19 . . . throwers of stones, and archers,  
 . . . like hordes of wasps . . .  
 . . . the man-destroying War-god . . .

. . . protected by your convex shields,  
 Pamphyloi, Hylleis, and Dymanes,\* each distinct,  
 your murderous lances levelled in your hands.  
 . . . (not?) leave it all to the immortal gods

but with concerted charge at once we'll crush their  
 front,

meeting the enemy spearmen face to face.  
 A fearsome clangour will be heard, as the two sides  
 dash shields against round shields . . .

. . . falling upon each other,  
 and corselets on men's breasts will fend away  
 destruction, yet be dented by the points of spears.

The brazen helmets will resound beneath  
 the battering of rocks . . .

23a But as they fight, Athena, pale-eyed daughter  
 of Zeus who holds the Aegis,\* checks the wild  
 spears' flight.

A multitude will throw with javelins  
 sharp-pointed . . .

in light arms running forward . . .  
 Arcadians . . . the Argives' . . . along the wall . . .

. . . from pale-eyed Athena . . . ditch . . .  
 They will kill every Spartan that they catch  
 fleeing the battle . . .



*Tyrtaeus*

- 2 *Pelops' broad sea-circled land*: the Peloponnese. Tyrtaeus refers to the legendary migration of the Dorians from central Greece in alliance with Heracles' son Hyllus, whose grandsons or great-grandsons established the three Peloponnesian kingdoms of Sparta, Argos, and Messene.
- 19 *Pamphyloi, Hylleis, and Dymanes*: the three traditional Dorian tribes, one supposedly descended from Hyllus, the other two from sons of Aegimius, who was a son of Dorus, the mythical ancestor of the Dorians.
- 23a *the Aegis*: an impenetrable goatskin that guarantees victory; in Homer it is held by Zeus or Athena. Hence our expression 'under the aegis of —'.